

FIRST
HISTORY LESSONS

THE LANGUAGES
OF OUR COUNTRY

DEBARATI BAGCHI

TRANSLATION
ARUNAVA SINHA

ILLUSTRATIONS

RANJIT CHITRAKAR
SIRAJUDAULLA CHITRAKAR



First History Lessons: The Languages of Our Country

Debarati Bagchi

Translated from the Original Bengali by
Arunava Sinha

Kolkata, March 2023

First History Lessons: The Languages of Our Country
Kolkata, March 2023

Author– Debarati Bagchi

Translator – Arunava Sinha

Editor – Anwesha Sengupta, Debarati Bagchi

Illustrations – Ranjit Chitrakar, Sirajudaulla Chitrakar

Cover, map and planning – Wasim Helal

Printed by – S. S. Print, 8, Narasingha Lane, Raja Ram Mohan Roy Sarani, Kolkata - 700009

Publisher – Institute of Development Studies Kolkata,

27/D, DD Block, Sector 1, Bidhannagar, Kolkata, West Bengal 700064

Website – www.idsk.edu.in

Email – idsk@idskmail.com / office@idsk.edu.in

Sponsored by – Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Liaison Office, New Delhi

C-15, SDA Market, New Delhi – 110016, India

Website – <https://www.rosalux.in>

Email – south-asia@rosalux.org

This book will be given free of cost to various government/non-government institutions, policymakers, media, teachers and students associated with the field of education.

This publication is sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung with grants from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany. This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication.

The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the partner and does not necessarily reflect a position of RLS.

Contents

1. The Frontiers of Language	07
2. Major Languages, Minor Languages	13
3. Bengal, Bangla, Bangladesh	
A. The Division of Bengal and Unifying to Prevent it	21
B. A Separate Country for Bangla	27
4. Language Binds, Language Breaks?	
A. One Language, One State	33
B. The Language War in Assam	40
5. The Country Belongs to Everyone, but are Some of Them Still Left Out?	49
6. And finally	53

First History Lessons: The Languages of Our Country



1. The Frontiers of Language

Once, as a child, I'd been on holiday to Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka. The name has changed now, of course. The people there speak Kannada, and, following the way the name is pronounced in that language, the city is now officially called Bengaluru. We boarded the Yesvantpur Express at Howrah Station, to travel from Kolkata to Bengaluru. The train would arrive at its destination after passing through four states. I was very happy. It meant a long time spent in the train, eating in it, sleeping in it. I had already decided not to let anyone else take the window seat. I had to look at every station on the way, after all. I would have to keep my eyes open for the large yellow boards where the names of the stations are written in three languages—I'd learn the names of so many new places. For quite some time after the train set off, I found I could read the names in Bangla alongside English and Hindi. Then at one point Bangla was replaced by a new script. The train didn't stop at every station; it rushed through many of them. When it stopped at Bhubaneswar, I realised we were in the state of Odisha, adjacent to West Bengal. I carefully observed the script used by the Odia language. Then the train entered Andhra Pradesh. I guessed that the script in which the name of Vijaywada station was written must be Telugu. And then, as soon as we entered Karnataka, the

script changed to Kannada. Long distance trains are so much fun—I got to see four separate languages, and even begun to recognize some of their alphabets!

Our country is enormous. Each different part has its own unique differences. Some of it is covered in mountains, and some, in forests. Some places are next to rivers or seas, some others are congested cities, and in some areas—mile upon mile of farmland and villages surrounded by greenery. Biting cold in some parts, steaming hot in others, raining incessantly in yet others. That's not all—the people of each place have so many different languages and religions and attire, so many different kinds of food. We live together with all our differences in this country.

You need a suitable mechanism to govern such a large and diverse country. That's why the prime minister is at the head, with his ministers and officials, adding up to a central government. The huge country is divided into smaller portions, each of them a state. There are arrangements to keep the states separate from one another, so as to divide up the tasks of managing them. A chief minister, along with his officials, is in charge of governing each state. They know the borders up to which they can govern; what lies beyond belongs to a neighbouring state. For instance, moving westwards from West Bengal, we get Jharkhand. To the south-west it's Odisha, and diagonally to the north-east

it's Assam. We cannot visit every state, can we? But from the map we can find out the name and location of every state. Of course, if we get time and the opportunity we can always visit, either on a train or a bus or a plane. There we can hear conversations in a different language, see the script of that language on street signs and billboards. The food is different too.

The borders between states have been created for the convenience of administration. But do you think they work the same way on the ground? It isn't as though everything changes like magic as soon as we cross the border between two states. If we take the train from Jharkhand to Purulia, we will see the language on the station signboard changing to Bangla. But if we get off the train and talk to the people, we'll find out that the languages of the people of Jharkhand and Purulia are quite similar. Many of the people in both these areas speak in Santhali. During British rule, this area was part of the larger Jungle Mahal district, which was later divided up between various states. Purulia is now part of West Bengal. Those who speak Bangla in Purulia, however, don't speak the Bangla you hear in Kolkata—it has a different intonation. Even though they belong to the same state, Purulia is far away from Kolkata. The people of Jharkhand are their next-door neighbours, yet they live in an entirely different state. The everyday conversations between

people, their meetings, their food and music—these cannot be separated by strict political borders. All these exchanges take place between neighbours, which is why people who live close to one another usually have similarities in their languages.

Borders are such strange things. They can divide people living as neighbours, using the same language, into two distinct countries. In Bangladesh, which is right next to West Bengal, people also speak Bangla—even if the local accents are different, even if some words are different. When India was partitioned in 1947, the border was drawn through the province of Bengal. The basis of this division was religion. And so the people of Bengal, who spoke the same language, were split into two countries only because of different religions. The people on both sides of the border still speak the same language, but they cannot meet one another as easily as before. How strange it is to consider that while in one corner of the huge country of India with its many languages lies West Bengal, whose language is Bangla, right next to it is an entire country whose language is also Bangla. And yet this country, Bangladesh, is a foreign land.

Can language and religion be used at will to draw borders? Why are such borders drawn anyway? This does not, of course, happen suddenly one day. Behind the borders of states or of countries, behind the borders that spring

up—or are manufactured—between people living together lie long histories. Sometimes the state imposes such borders from above, and people protest against them. And sometimes people themselves demand borders. A string of events leads to a time when borders come up between people on the basis of languages. Let us pick some such periods from the storehouse of history to understand this phenomenon better.





2. Major Languages, Minor Languages

There are many aspects to our identities—language, religion, caste, where we live. When we read history we see that there have been times when one of these identities became bigger than the rest. Sometimes that identity united people, sometimes it led to clashes. For instance, we know that in 1947, India was partitioned on the basis of religion. The difference in people's religions became the biggest factor. Being Hindu or Muslim no longer remained a matter of identity—it became a reason for enmity. Riots and violence broke out. But after Independence, language became the biggest form of identity. People in several parts of the country began to demand that states be formed on the basis of language. Meaning, let there be separate states wherever there is a majority of people speaking a particular language.

But this was not how states had been created in British India before the Partition. Let me tell you about that period.

To make governance easier, the British colony of India was divided into several provinces and districts. When it came to the ways in which the provinces would be formed and the districts would be allocated, the British government changed these often and according to their needs. Their calculations were usually based on how large a province should be in order to extract taxes

easily from its feudal landowners, or on which province a district should belong to for trade to be profitable. These were the factors that led them to draw borders between districts and provinces. And as their thinking changed, so did the borders.

India's British rulers had no 'one-language one-province' policy. So, every province had people who spoke different languages. But then power was never distributed equally, so in each of the larger provinces, those who spoke the majority language were more powerful, and the others, not as much. So even though they lived together within the same province, there were differences in terms of importance and authority between people speaking different languages. The Bengal Presidency was created at the very beginning of British rule in 1765 as the greater Bengal province comprising Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. Then, when the British conquered Assam in 1826, they added it to the Bengal Presidency. Imagine how many different languages were spoken by the people of this province. There were speakers not just of Bangla but also of Odia and Asomiya. And do you suppose the Bangla language was the same everywhere? It had many variations. This is why all sides must be considered when it comes to the history of the conflict between languages. On the one hand, there was the clash between various languages, with some grabbing a larger space and others falling back. On the other, there were the battles

within a single language. For instance, if I were to say the Bangla language left the others behind, we will have to consider which and whose Bangla we're talking of. The Bengalis of Shantipur spoke the language in a way that was far removed from Chattagram's. And the Bangla of Sylhet was quite different from both of these, as was the Bangla spoken in Kolkata.

It became evident from the beginning that, in Bengal, it was the Bengalis of Kolkata and those who lived nearby who made gains at the expense of those who spoke other languages. Kolkata was the capital of the Bengal Presidency, and the British administration was firmly established here. The fort, factories, courts and offices all came up in Kolkata and its surrounding areas. At first, even the schools, colleges, universities and presses were established here. Having learnt English, the Bengali people in this area became adept at working as clerks for the English in their offices. So the Bengalis of Kolkata were preferred to others in the province when it came to jobs. As a result they marched ahead of the other Bangla-speaking people in the province, as well as those who spoke other languages.

It's not only in terms of jobs and earnings that the Bengalis of Kolkata sped ahead of everyone else. During the nineteenth century, Kolkata became the centre of the Bangla language and Bengali culture. The British had come to India for trade to begin with, and then to rule. At the same time, a number of

men and women from the West had come to India to spread the word about Christianity. They were known as missionaries. Everywhere they went, they wanted to talk to the people about religion in their local language. They felt the locals would understand them better, even perhaps agree to convert to Christianity and thus make their mission—and journey from a distant land—a success. So the first ever presses in many areas were set up at the urging of the missionaries, for printing grammars as well as Bibles in the local language. In 1800, the missionaries had established a press in Srirampur, not far from Kolkata. Many books began to be printed there in the Bangla language. Even the educated Bengalis of Kolkata learnt printing technology and started publishing books in Bangla. They tried to tie down the Bangla language with rules of grammar and spelling and make it stronger. Writing Bangla books, printing Bangla books, managing the market for Bangla books—all of these were under their control. In a province of so many languages, Bangla grew more powerful than Odia and Asomiya.

But did this mean all variations of Bangla, from all places, became equally powerful? That was not the case. It was the Bangla used by the educated, urban people of Kolkata and its surrounding areas that gradually began to be prized as the highest form of the language. This was the Bangla that gained acceptance in schools and colleges, and the one that became popular through

literature. The Banglas of Purulia and Bankura, of Chattagram and Sylhet, began to wilt before the vigour of the Bangla of Kolkata.

As this form of Bangla grew and grew, it reduced the others in stature. The people of Kolkata grew haughty and arrogant. The presses, the book market, Presidency College, Kolkata University—all of them developed in and for the city. Many people used to travel from the distant districts of the province to Kolkata for their education. Freedom fighter Bipin Chandra Pal, for instance, went from Sylhet to Kolkata, to study in Presidency College. But he found himself in great trouble—everyone spoke a polished Bangla in the city, while he spoke the version of Sylhet. The students from Chattagram or Barishal or Jashore or Khulna did not have the Kolkata accent either. Their fellow students from Kolkata used to mock the way they spoke. Bipin Pal wrote in his autobiography that the first thing that students who travelled to Kolkata did was to try and master the Bangla spoken in the city. Or it would be impossible to mingle with their city friends. This is why I said that there are histories of conflicts even within the same language. And those who speak the versions that are not officially acknowledged lag behind in various ways—which no one wants to do.

It is true that states were not created on the basis of language during the British era in India. But the ground was laid in different ways at that time

for the conflict over which languages were leaders and which lagged behind, which had more power and which had less. On top of which there was the question of numbers. The British rulers of India believed in their hearts and souls that, to govern the people of such a large colony, they had to know everything about them. So they used to prepare thick reports and long lists of the number of people living in each part of the country, what they ate, what they wore, which gods they worshipped, which languages they spoke in, and many other details. They called these reports and lists the census. Work on the first census in British India began in 1872, and it was published in 1881. The census revealed which language was the most used in a particular province, and which to lesser extents. At the same time, the religions practised by the people who used each of these languages were also identified. For instance, the report for Bengal showed how many people used Bangla, and how many, the other languages. The report also showed how many of those who used Bangla were Hindus, how many were Muslims, and so on. People who had lived alongside one another for a long time now began to think of themselves in numerical terms. Since conflicts were erupting over identities determined by religion and language, the question of which group had higher numbers slowly became more and more important.

I have already told you that the British used to divide or restructure provinces

on the basis of their business interests. This game of division and restructuring often led to people speaking the same language being split between two provinces. Sometimes one language would even be imposed on another. But the common people did not accept this silently. Many of them fought for their own languages at different points of time in various parts of the country. These struggles over language continued in a number of states of India even after Independence. I cannot talk about all of them—we don't have enough space in this book. Let us look back at the histories of two of the languages of eastern India—Bangla and Asomiya. We will begin with the stories of the battles over the Bangla language in West Bengal, where it is used in India today, and in the neighbouring country of Bangladesh. And since Assam is right next to Bengal, it is difficult to separate the histories of these two places. So I will talk of the language movement in Assam too.





3. Bengal, Bangla, Bangladesh

A. The Division of Bengal and Unifying to Prevent It

The year was 1905. The British were ruling India. As you know, large areas like Bihar, Odisha and Assam were all part of the province of Bengal. But the British were unable to expand their rule beyond Assam, into the mountains of the north-east. So in 1874, the separate province of Assam was created. It was decided that the plains of the Bengal province would continue to be administered as before, but Assam and the mountains around it would be brought under stricter governance. Experiments were conducted with several of the provinces at the time, keeping in mind calculations of profits and losses. Even though Assam became a separate province in 1874, the province of Bengal remained an enormous one—almost all of today's West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar and Bangladesh were included in it. In 1905, the British government implemented a major change in the province of Bengal. It said that it was struggling to govern such a large province—so the task of administration had to be made easier by dividing Bengal into two parts. Accordingly, the eastern part of Bengal was combined with Assam to create the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. The western part continued to include Bihar and Odisha; and Kolkata remained in there too.

As I have said before, Bangla literature and culture acquired quite a sheen thanks to Kolkata's educated, English-speaking, urban Bengalis, most whom were Hindus. It wasn't just Kolkata—the western part of the province of Bengal had always had a majority of Hindus, while the Muslims were concentrated on the eastern side. When the British government decided to split Bengal into two, they thought of making Dhaka the capital of East Bengal and Assam. They even said that Dhaka would become as important as Kolkata. But this plan made it look as though the British were trying to separate the Muslim Bengalis of east Bengal and the Hindu Bengalis of west Bengal. Everyone grew furious at this sudden division of the province. Everyone speaks the same language in Bengal, they said, they must all be part of the same province, in no circumstances can they be separated.

Meanwhile, a political party named the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. It had begun protesting against British rule which, from the late nineteenth century, had robbed the country of its independence. The anti-British movement was gathering pace in West Bengal, thanks to Congress leaders. As soon as the division of Bengal was proposed, Congress leaders joined hands with the stalwarts of the worlds of education and literature. Giving importance to the identity of language, they tried to unite all the people of Bengal. The protests began with signatures and petitions. Then British

goods were boycotted. It was decided that everything would be manufactured locally, in order to weaken the British. The British drew their strength from trade. If the Indians began to use homemade or swadeshi goods instead of imports from England, it would hit the business interests of the British and put them in trouble—this was the plan. The government announced the division of Bengal in July 1905. The arrangement was to come into effect on 16 October. Rabindranath Tagore declared that Hindus and Muslims should seal their brotherhood with rakhis—which, as you know, sisters and brothers use traditionally in India to celebrate their relationship as siblings. People of both religions, united by their use of a single language, responded to his call by tying rakhis around one another's wrists. Language was like the thread of the rakhi, linking all of Bengal's people together. For them Tagore wrote his song 'Amaar shonaar Bangla, aami tomay bhalobashi (I love you, my dearest Bangla'. In this case, Bangla stood for both the language and the region).

But did each and every Bengali in the province join hands to oppose this division of Bengal? No, they did not. As I have mentioned, those in the front ranks of the development of the Bangla language and culture in Kolkata were educated Hindus. Despite sharing the identity of language, all Bangla-speaking people were not equal. There was, of course, the difference between rich and poor Bengalis. But it was also observed that Hindu Bengalis and Muslim

Bengalis did not enjoy equal power in society. Why not? Let me explain.

What does it look like, in simple terms? A tyrannical king, against whom the subjects have united. Only if they can stay united in their battle will they be able to defeat the king. But the subjects are not all the same, there are clashes between them. The wealthy landowner and the impoverished farmer who grows the crops on the landowner's land are both subjects of the British rulers, they even speak in the same language. But are they equal? In truth, their power in society is vastly unequal. So when people unite on the basis of a single identity, they often include only one kind of person in large numbers and exclude the rest. The Swadeshi movement opposing the division of Bengal gathered pace. Its leaders were those Bengalis of Kolkata who had the power of both education and money on their side. They suggested boycotting foreign goods. Meanwhile, poor peasants and small traders got into trouble. Many foreign goods were cheap, but now they were forced to spend more money on homemade products instead. How would the poor of Bengal join a movement that would cause them financial losses? They could not be part of this unequal coalition.

After the division of Bengal, Kolkata was no longer the only capital city. New buildings came up in Dhaka, and the British began to visit it more often.

Dhaka was a glittering city under the Mughals, but had faded afterwards for various reasons. Now, its fortunes seemed to be on the verge of recovering. Many Bengalis of east Bengal thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a new province with Dhaka as its capital. As I have said before, there were more Muslims among the Bengalis in this part of the country. Many of them were quite pleased with Dhaka becoming the new capital. They felt that the Hindu Bengalis in and around Kolkata had got many benefits for so long, now it was time they got some too. These people also distanced themselves from the movement opposed to the division of Bengal. The battle had begun on the basis of language-based identity, but the differences between the rich and the poor, and between different religions, had crept in.

But whether the voices were for or against the division of Bengal, the protests were powerful. The British government retreated. The two Bengals became one again in 1911. As I told you, which of our identities becomes more important changes with time. Over the next four decades it turned out that the conflict became very big not over language but over religion. In 1947, this led to the partition of the country on the basis of religion. Two countries were created—India and Pakistan. Bengal was partitioned too, with the eastern side going to Pakistan, and being named East Pakistan. And West Bengal stayed

in India. Muslims were more in number in East Pakistan and Hindus, in West Bengal—although the language on both sides was Bangla. So, the first partition of Bengal took place in 1905, and the second, in 1947. But there was a major difference. On the first occasion, the British had created two separate provinces by dividing Bengal. In 1947 the two Bengals became parts of two different countries.



B. A Separate Country for Bangla

So the country was partitioned on the basis of religion. But immediately after this, the struggle on the basis of language began afresh. This time the centre of the movement was Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan. The new government in Pakistan was located in West Pakistan, which had been created by partitioning India in the north-west. There were very few speakers of Bangla among those in charge of running the government of Pakistan. Bangla was not taken into account when forming the language policies of this new country. Urdu was one of the prevalent languages among the people in the north and north-west of India before Partition. The Pakistan government decided that Urdu would be the national language. But the language of the people of East Pakistan was Bangla. And they belonged to the same country as those in West Pakistan. They had never read or spoken or written in Urdu. So they were unwilling to accept the new policy. The Bangla language flowed in their veins, like their blood. Besides, if Urdu was the national language all official work would be conducted in it. The Bengalis worried that they would never get government jobs; those would be reserved only for those who knew Urdu.

The people of East Pakistan demanded that Bangla be included alongside Urdu and English as official languages. But those who ran the government from

West Pakistan remained unmoved. They began to remove Bangla from the currency and stamps, and made arrangements for school and college education to be imparted in Urdu. In January 1952, Sir Khawaja Nazimuddin, the new prime minister of Pakistan, visited Dhaka from the capital city of Karachi in West Pakistan. He declared with great firmness, at a huge gathering in the locality of Paltan, that Urdu would remain the national language of Pakistan; the decision would not be reconsidered. A storm of protest began at once. Students, teachers and people from every level of society took to the streets. The government took a hard stand, and declared all meetings and protests and processions illegal.

It was the morning of 21 February. The students of Dhaka University had organized an enormous procession. Meanwhile the government had stationed troops all over the city, and was keeping a strict eye on all activities. Anyone who protested on the streets would be punished. Ignoring the warnings, a large number of students gathered at Dhaka Medical College. From there they marched towards the Assembly building. The police tried to beat up the students to stop them. Many were injured in the lathi-charge, but the rest marched on. They surrounded the Assembly building. Now the police opened fire. Several students were killed, many more were injured. Writer and journalist Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, who was studying in Dhaka at the

time, rushed to the spot when he heard about the firing. The deaths of Salam, Rafiq, Shafiur, Jabbar and Barkat shook him. His poem 'Ekusher Gaan' (The Song of the 21st) was printed on the last page of next day's newspaper, though the poet's name was not published that day. Later, the poem was set to music to transform it into a song to honour the language martyrs of 21 February. Even today, processions are organized on that date every year to sing this song and convey the people's respect to those who laid down their lives for their language. This is how it sounds in English translation:

Reddened with my brothers' blood, 21st February
It's always in my memory.
Tears of mothers who lost their sons flowed in February
It's always in my memory.
Reddened with the blood of my dearest land, 21st February
It's always in my memory.
Arise, serpents, arise, all you storms
May the world quake with rage at this killing
You murdered our dearest boys to thwart us
Come the revolution, you will not escape
The final judgement on this blood-reddened history
Will come from 21st February.

The incidents of 21 February angered the people. Their protests intensified, spreading to many districts of East Pakistan. Two years later, the Pakistan government was forced to accept Bangla as a national language too. The Constitution was amended to state that Pakistan's languages would be Urdu and Bangla. A martyrs' memorial was built in Dhaka, called the Shohid Minar, in memory of those who gave their lives to the battle for their language. 21 February 1952 changed the course of Pakistan's history.

The Bangla language may have been given space in the new country, but the people of the Bangla-majority East Pakistan had many other complaints. They believed that the Pakistan government had been partial from the very beginning. The people of East Pakistan had been given far less power than their counterparts from West Pakistan when it came to jobs in the government, the armed forces, and in many other fields. The lion's share of government expenditure was also in West Pakistan. They could not accept this monopoly rule. And the rage from having Urdu imposed on them was always simmering. The mounting anger and grievances led the Bengalis of East Pakistan to demand a separate country of their own. Under the leadership of the chief of the Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the demand for an independent 'Bangladesh' began to gather strength. And after much bloodshed and war and many deaths, Bangladesh was born. Considering themselves a single nation,

the Bangla-speakers of the area united to give birth to their own country. The marchers of 21 February did not hesitate to lay down their lives for the sake of their language. That is why this day is observed all over the world as International Mother Language Day. After the British divided Bengal in 1905, Rabindranath Tagore had written the song 'I love you, my dearest Bangla' to unite all Bengalis. This was the song that became the national anthem of Bangladesh when it was born as a new country in 1971.





நன்றி



धन्यवाद



Thank You



شکریہ



धन्यवाद



ଧନ୍ୟବାଦ

4. Language Binds, Language Breaks

A. One Language, One State

Let us come back to our own country, India. The speciality of this country is that people who speak different languages live together, it's a grand cacophony. As I said in the beginning, each state has its own language. But then, people who speak other languages also live in those states. In the state of West Bengal, for instance, there are so many languages besides Bangla. Go to Darjeeling for a holiday, and you'll meet Nepali-speakers. If you spend enough time there, you can pick up some of their language, and listen to stories about their past, their ways of living, how they spend their days. Living in a country like India is all the more enjoyable because we can listen to many such stories.

But does language only bind? We see the opposite all around us too. It is true that every state has people speaking different languages, but the official language of the state is usually the one used by the largest number of people. In West Bengal, for instance, the largest number of people speak Bangla, which is why the names of stations are written in Bangla and we study Bangla in schools. But as we have seen, the Bangla of Calcutta had grown

more powerful even without being the version spoken by the majority. It is because of this difference in authority that differences arise between major and minor languages in a state. Those who use one of the languages that lag behind feel that the majority language wields too much power, that they're being cornered. All the benefits are going to those who use the main language of the state. Some of them begin to say that they want to leave this state and have one of their own. Their numbers grow gradually, and the demand for a separate state grows stronger. Not that everyone who doesn't use the majority language in a state is seeking to separate—in many states, various languages coexist peacefully. But in some places conflicts do break out between languages. Such conflicts occupy a good deal of space in the history of independent India. And they have even caused changes in borders sometimes, leading to the creation of new states.

When India became independent, the country was divided on the basis of religion. The identity determined by religion had become more important than all others. There were riots and violence everywhere. It was in this turbulent environment that the Indian National Congress formed the first government of independent India. And even before the violence over religious differences could stop, the identity given by language reared its

head. The demand for constituting states on the basis of language was voiced in different parts of the country. Speakers of Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada and Marathi had long lived in the Madras Presidency of British India. Soon after Independence, those who spoke Telugu demanded to be separated from Madras. They alleged that the Tamil had most power in Madras, with its speakers dominating everyone else. It was time for a separate state for those who spoke Telugu, they said. They would have greater benefits and more power there.

Before Independence, the Congress did believe that states should be created on the basis of language. But the party changed its mind after forming the first government of independent India. It felt that in those difficult times it was most important to unite the diverse people. Only then would all of them learn to think of India as their own country, to obey its laws. An individual had a number of identities—Indian, perhaps a Bengali, perhaps a Hindu or a Muslim. The new government said: it's entirely possible that you speak in Bangla, that you perform rituals in a temple or pray in a mosque, but above all, remember that you are an Indian. That is your most important identity. The violence during Partition had already brought up the question of Hindu identity and Muslim identity. The Congress reasoned that creating

states on the basis of language in that situation would make the identity of language—who's a Bengali and who's a Tamil, who's a Marathi and who's a Punjabi—more important, and make it very difficult to unite the people of the country. Instead of the strong emotion associated with being an Indian, various smaller emotions associated with individual languages would assert their claim. So the demands for language-based states was postponed for the moment.

But seeing that the government was paying no attention, the passion of language-based identities became even stronger. The leader of the Telugu-speaking people who wanted their own state was a Congress member himself. His name was Potti Sreeramulu. No matter what the top leaders and ministers in the capital city of New Delhi said, he used to believe that people of his language needed a separate state. A Gandhian, he had faith in protesting by fasting. The British rulers were terrified of Mahatma Gandhi's fasts. They knew that if Gandhi fell ill, the entire population of India would be out on the streets agitating against them. The tyrannical British were no longer ruling India, it was the people's own government. But when this government paid no attention to the demand, Potti Sreeramulu also chose the path of fasting. But this did not change the minds of the leaders in

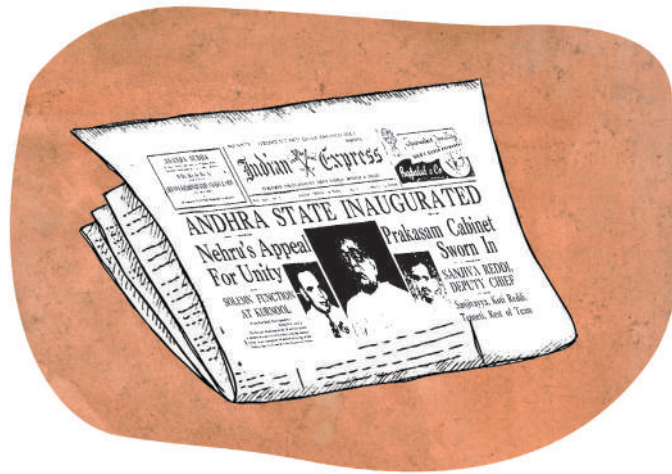
Delhi. Potti Sreeramulu died after fifty-six days of fasting. Now the Telugu-speaking people became furious, and an intense protest began against the new government in Madras. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru found himself in a tight corner. To calm down the situation, he accepted the demand for a separate Telugu state. Andhra Pradesh was born. After this, the demand for language-based states, which had died down across the country, reared its head again. Speakers of Kannada, Tamil, Marathi and Punjabi also asked for states of their own.

Now the Centre was in a bind. How was unity to be achieved when language-based identities were asserting themselves? Then again, to include everyone, it was essential to give importance to their language, to their opinion. The government began thinking afresh about how separate states could be created. Finally, a law was passed by Parliament in 1956. It said that new states would be created in different parts of the country on the basis of the language spoken by the majority of the people there. And so several language-based states like Andhra Pradesh were formed. But it wasn't as though putting people who spoke the same language in the same state would solve all the problems. Who got more of the benefits and the power, and who didn't get enough? These controversies could not be subdued by

the bonds forged by a single language. All kinds of problems persist even in states with one language, and demands for separate states are raised in response to many other forms of injustice. This was why the state of the Telugu-speaking people was broken up in 2014 to form the separate state of Telangana. The division of states and the creation of new states continues.

But dividing a state didn't mean people couldn't travel from one state to another. As I have mentioned, all of us can go to any state we like and live there too. Everyone in the country has this right. But trouble still breaks out in many states between people who speak different languages. Some people who use one of those languages say: this state belongs only to us, get rid of the rest. Actually it isn't as simple as my language versus your language. The real conflict is over who gets—and doesn't get—the jobs, the land, the property and many other benefits in a state. If the people who use one particular language get more of these, their power also increases. And those who have more power often consider everyone else inferior. This is humiliating for the rest. These battles for benefits, power and prestige under the pretext of clashes between languages often turn violent. Such violence has broken out in different parts of independent India at different times. Recounting all those histories will mean having to say more than can

be fitted into this book. Let me offer one example instead. In the state of Assam, to the north-east of West Bengal, there has been a suppressed state of conflict between the speakers of Asomiya and Bangla, which has led to bloodshed from time to time. Let me talk of this history of conflict in some detail. It will show you how many complex calculations of gains and losses lie behind a clash over language. The strife between the Assamese and the Bengalis began during British rule, so we have to go back to that period to understand it properly.



B. The Language War in Assam

The history of language wars in Assam is a long one. Accusations and counter-accusations began in the time of British rule, with the Assamese fighting back against the imposition of Bangla. Then, in another period, it was the Bengalis who fought against the imposition of Asomiya. Each of these languages was the powerful one during some periods, and was the weaker one in some others. Let me begin at the beginning. The language used by many of the people in today's state of Assam is Asomiya. But besides Asomiya, people who speak languages like Bangla, Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa and others also live here. Many Bengalis have been living in Assam for a long time. In truth, the histories of Bengal and Assam are intertwined.

The British occupied Assam in 1826. By then they had entrenched themselves in Bengal, but not advanced farther to the east. Eventually, they did manage to conquer Assam. But it would take a long time to teach English to the local people, and to train them to work and give them jobs. Administration could not be postponed till then. And the real objective of the British was to set up tea gardens in the hills of Assam and begin trading in tea. For this too they needed clerks and treasurers, porters and guards.

Meanwhile, the Bengalis had already learnt English and become adept at working for the British. So, after doing the calculations of profitability, the rulers decided to deploy Bengalis for the moment to do their work in Assam. Many Bengalis were given jobs in the new offices that opened there. So Bengalis began to live in Assam from that time onwards. The British rulers also instituted the use of Bangla, without caring for the languages spoken by the local people. It was declared that the language of education and work would be Bangla. The rulers did not even want to acknowledge that Asomiya was a separate language—they used to say it was just a version of Bangla.

Let me point out something here. I have said at the beginning of this book that the Bangla language began to change from the onset of the British period, thanks to the missionaries. The same thing happened in Assam. On the one hand, the British added Assam to the province of Bengal and established the use of Bangla. On the other, the missionaries who went to Assam discovered that the people there spoke a different language. They set up presses and began to print books and periodicals in Asomiya. There was a form of Asomiya that people used orally, which had existed in ancient manuscripts, but the script, spelling and grammatical rules were

formulated in the 1840s and 50s. The educated people of Assam stepped up to strengthen their language, which, like everyone else, they were proud of. They began to question why Bangla had been imposed on Assam when the people of the state had a language of their own. The protests gathered strength, and others from different segments of society joined in.

In 1874, it became necessary to split Assam from the province of Bengal. This however was mainly to protect British business interests. Many indigenous and tribal people lived in the hills of Assam. The British simply couldn't subdue them. Thus it was decided that the region would have to be administered more strictly, so that more force could be used to occupy the hills. Only strict governance would enable more tea gardens to be set up, and more farming, so as to make more profits. As I've said, the British divided and reconfigured states keeping their profits from trade in mind. It was these calculations that led to the formation of the province of Assam. And just before this, in 1873, the British government acknowledged Asomiya as an official language.

Despite being a separate province, Assam couldn't separate itself entirely from Bengal. A large number of Bengalis lived in Assam—in particular, many of the people of Sylhet, nestling in the hills of southern Assam and

Cachar spoke Bangla. The residents here began to say that these districts should become part of the province of Bengal. A large section of the Assamese people wanted the same thing. That would reduce the authority of Bengalis in Assam. But who was listening? The British government continued with its game of changing the borders repeatedly, according to its business requirements. As I have told you before, when Bengal was split in 1905, Assam had become part of east Bengal. The Bengalis of Sylhet and Cachar were very happy then to be part of east Bengal. But Sylhet and Cachar went back to Assam when it became a separate province again in 1911, following the reunification of Bengal. And the conflict between the Bengalis and the Assamese continued.

There was a new development in 1920. It turned out that there were more people in east Bengal than the available farmland could serve—there wasn't enough land anymore. In Assam, the cultivation system was different. Unlike in Bengal, the land had not been divided up between feudal landowners. The British smelt profits, as usual. Only if the free land was cultivated could they extract more taxes. They called the peasants of east Bengal over to Assam to farm on the land available there. So cultivators from east Bengal moved in droves to Assam, and then stayed on. They

farmed the land and settled down. Most of them were Muslim Bengalis. Slowly, they taught themselves the Asomiya language too. And after years of living in the province, they began to introduce themselves as Assamese. But not everyone forgot that they had originally come from Bengal. On the contrary, many of the Assamese began to feel that after the educated Bengalis had monopolized the salaried jobs, the Bengali peasants had arrived to occupy their land. So a rift developed between the Assamese of Assam and the Assamese who had originated in east Bengal. The two sides still clash frequently.

At the time of Partition, most of Sylhet, which lay in south Assam, went to East Pakistan. Only a small portion, along with Cachar, remained in the Barak Valley. After Independence, it was seen that the Asomiya-speaking people were the majority in all the other districts of Assam, but in the southern part of the Barak Valley almost everyone was Bengali. After Independence, states began to be formed on the basis of language in many parts of India. It was at this time that the government of Assam declared that Asomiya would be the only official language of the state. As soon as this announcement was made in 1961, the Bengalis of Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi in the Barak Valley began their own agitation. Strikes and

marches broke out. Crowds began to gather at Silchar Railway Station on the morning of 19 May 1961. The police of the Assam government was present too. A furious battle erupted between the two sides. Eleven people lost their lives that day to police firing. The Assam government retreated. It was decided that while Asomiya would be the state language everywhere in Assam, in the Barak Valley it would be Bangla. Many forget that hidden behind the bloodshed of the language conflict in Assam are age-old calculations by the British government about its business interests. Reading the history of this conflict reveals its complexities. Both sides are seen to have amassed stories of deprivation and humiliation.

We hear a great deal of discussion about the conflict between Asomiya and Bangla. The conflict has been going on a long time. But there are other languages in use in Assam besides these two. How much do we know about those? Yet those who use them are fighting every day to keep their languages alive. They allege that Asomiya is imposed on everyone in Assam, that other languages have no status. Their own languages will die if this goes on, they say. The people of the Bodo tribe in the north of Assam have been battling for their language for a long time. It was not until 2004 that their language found a place on the list of India's 'scheduled' languages. The

Assam government has also finally acknowledged their language. Students can study in Bodo in schools, and it can be used in government documents too. But other languages continue their fight. It's not just in Assam but also across the entire country that a handful of powerful languages have been given extra space, because of which we know more about the history of their struggle for existence.



Year	What Happened
1765	The British East India Company gets the right to charge taxes in Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. This area becomes the province of Bengal.
1826	The East India Company conquers Assam, it becomes part of the province of Bengal.
1873	Asomiya is recognised as an official language
1874	Assam is separated from Bengal to become a province on its own.
1905	Bengal is divided. Many of the districts of east Bengal are combined with Assam to form the province of East Bengal and Assam. The rest of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha form the province of Bengal.
1911	The division of Bengal is annulled. The old province of Bengal comes back into existence, Assam becomes separate.
1947	The country becomes independent and is partitioned. Two separate countries of India and Pakistan are formed. The eastern part of Bengal goes to Pakistan.
1971	The Bangla-speaking people of East Bengal separate from West Pakistan to form a new country—Bangladesh.





5. The Country Belongs to Everyone, but are Some of Them Still Left Out?

Everyone grows up with their own identity. Their respective languages and religions can coexist easily. This should not trouble anyone. The trouble begins when one language tries to assert itself over the others. When people who have greater power try to impose their language on others, so as to perpetuate their own authority. This is why we saw educated Bengali Hindus wielding more authority during the division of Bengal in 1905. So they had greater power when it came to imposing their demands on others. Even the might of the British had to bow to it. In the same way, as soon as authority went into the hands of West Pakistan after Partition and the formation of Pakistan, it tried to impose Urdu on everyone. When Assam was made part of Bengal, Bangla was imposed on the Assamese. Then, when Assam became a separate province, the government of Assam did the same thing. Since Bengalis were in a minority, Asomiya was imposed on everyone. And so the ups and downs of power struggles went on, while the history of language conflicts took ever-newer turns.

On the one hand, borders of multiple identities have been drawn around each of us. On the other, the state keeps telling us not to forget we're Indians. What does common sense suggest? That all of us are equals because we live in the same country, no matter what our individual identities are. But we never quite manage to be equal. The languages with greater authority try to swallow the

smaller ones. For instance, our union government lets out a roar every now and then—to convey the fact that everyone is Indian, it is necessary to have a single Indian language. People who speak Hindi have greater power in national politics. They have been taking the opportunity to insist that Hindi should become the language of the country, the national language. But not everyone in the country knows Hindi. In the same way, those who speak Hindi do not know the languages of the other people. So why will the others accept it if Hindi is imposed on them simply on the strength of greater power? The other people's languages are no less Indian. All of this leads to an uproar every now and then.

In any case, it isn't as though there is only one kind of Hindi in the country. Several varieties of Hindis are in use in different parts of India. In fact, the Hindi which there are attempts to foist on everyone as the national language is a forcibly manufactured language. This Hindi seeks to associate itself with Hindus alone. Hindustani used to be a colloquial mixture of Hindi and Urdu in north India. It was the fruit of the closely intermingled lives of Hindus and Muslims. But religious fundamentalism entered the picture in the twentieth century, complicating the story of languages. Many orthodox Hindu linguists tried to eliminate Urdu words and introduce a profusion of Sanskrit ones to create a new kind of Hindi. And then this language was attached to the Hindu identity. All this while, everyone wrote Hindustani easily using either the Devanagari

(for Hindi) or the Nastaliq (for Urdu) script. But now it began to be said that Hindi was the language of Hindus and had to be written in the Devanagari script alone, while Urdu and Nastaliq were the language and script, respectively, of Muslims. The gulf between religions over language and script widened further during Partition. The battle to make Urdu the sole national language of Pakistan was also underway. Somehow, Pakistan, Urdu and Muslims became one and the same thing in the imaginations of many people in India. They tried desperately to make Hindi the national language while eliminating Urdu. This effort has been going on for a long time. But it has not yet been possible to institute a national language or language of the country in India. Hindi and English have long been the official languages of India.

The eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution mentions 22 languages as the official languages of various states. There's no such thing as a national language. In any case, is fixing a label of 'national language' all that is needed for it to become everyone's language in the country? The concepts of country, nation and patriotism are taught to us from childhood. We are made to learn to respect these words. We get accustomed to them gradually. We stand up when we hear the national anthem, we show our respect to the national flag. But we all wonder whether all that is described as national includes each of us, or whether some of us have been left out. The people of the Mising tribe of Assam are

engaged in a struggle against Asomiya to keep their own language alive in the state. Buried in the news of the conflict between Bangla and Nepali, the Toto language still survived in a corner of north Bengal. Languages like these cannot be seen in any railway station. Do you think those who use these languages can add their voices to the arguments over whether the entire country should have a single language or not? They certainly can't. That right is limited to those who speak the major languages like Tamil or Bangla or Marathi or Asomiya. Is it then only a small number of people who decide what is national or what is to be associated with the country? What does this word 'country' refer to? Or the word 'national', for that matter? Do they talk about something that belongs to everyone, or something that everyone must follow? The state constantly evades this question.



6. And Finally

You may be wondering how I got to know all the stories I've been telling you. This is a very important question. Writing whatever comes to mind without reading and making enquiries does not amount to history. So I have read many books, writings by historians in journals and magazines, old newspapers and official documents, understood them and cross-checked the information in them before writing this book. Let me tell you about some of these texts. You can read them for yourselves once you grow up. You will find the story of Bipin Pal's journey from Sylhet to Kolkata in his autobiography *Memories of My Life and Times* (1932). I read about the division of Bengal and the movements against it in Sumit Sarkar's book *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908* (1973). In his book *Religion and Language in the Formation of Nationhood in Pakistan and Bangladesh* (1999), Tanvir Fazal has written about the history of the politics of language in Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh. You can learn about the writing of the Constitution of a newly independent India in 1950 and how states were formed on the basis of languages in Gyanesh Kudaisya's *A Republic in the Making: India in the 1950s* (2017). Lisa Mitchell's *Language, Emotion, and Politics in South India:*

The Making of a Mother Tongue (2009) talks of the fight for Telugu. I read the history of the creation of the Asomiya language in Bodhisatva Kar's *'Tongue has no Bone': Fixing the Assamese Language 1800-1930* (2008). In his book *Hindi Nationalism* (2001), Alok Rai has written of the conflict over making Hindi the national language and its history.



Many people have helped me write this book. They have pointed out mistakes and suggested better ways to write it. I must specially mention Subhash Ranjan Chakraborty, Manabi Majumdar, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Achin Chakraborty, Semanti Ghosh, Kritika Sengupta, Bodhisatva Kar, Amitava Gupta, Shouvik Bandyopadhyay, Paramita Chakraborty, Madhumita Basu, Sabir Ahmed, Priyankar Dey, Uponita Mukherjee, Supurna Banerjee, Arshi Parveen Gupta, Raisha Mahmood, Aishi Dutta, Rupkatha, Mohar Sengupta, Anwesha Sengupta and Tista Das. I am grateful to all of them.

We are grateful to Sunandini Banerjee for her comments on the English translation. We thank Sohini Sengupta for copy-editing the book.



About the Author, Translator and the Artists

Debarati Bagchi has written this book. She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies, New Delhi.

Arunava Sinha has translated this book into English. He is a literary translator and co-director of the Ashoka Centre for Translation at Ashoka University.

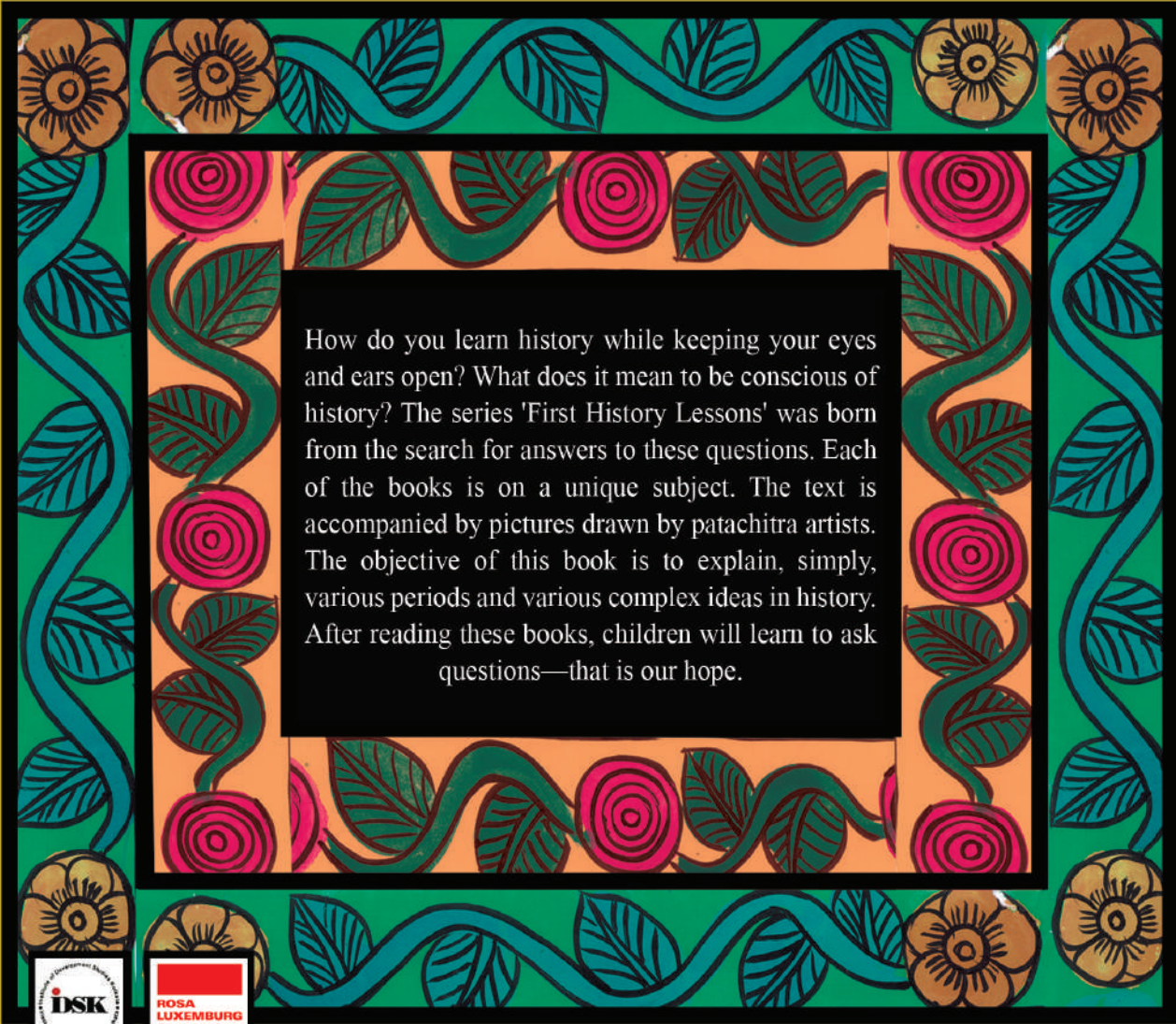
Wasim Helal has done the art direction, cover and maps for this book. He is a graphic designer by profession. Wasim does illustrations, covers and art direction for many Indian and foreign publishers.

The art in this book is by Ranjit Chitrakar and Sirajudaulla Chitrakar. By family tradition they are pata artists—those who make art on fabric. Ranjit and Shiraz work in the village of Naya, under the jurisdiction of Pingla police station in West Medinipur district, West Bengal. Following the tradition of pata art, they primarily paint narratives and compose songs about Hindu gods and goddesses. These days their art covers other themes too. Pata art is an example of the tradition of religious harmony in Bengal. Although the artists are often Muslims, their art and lyrics are usually centred on stories of Hinduism. What's more, according to their own social narrative, they are descendants of the Hindu god Viswakarma. This is how Islam and Hinduism are blended in their lives and work.



The **Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK)** was set up in 2002 by the Government of West Bengal as an autonomous centre of excellence in social sciences. It is a society with an autonomous governing body with eminent scholars and Government's nominees. IDSK is recognized for its advanced academic research and informed policy advice in the areas of literacy, education, health, gender, employment, technology, communication, human sciences and economic development. The academic programmes at IDSK include MPhil (2006-2022) and PhD in social sciences and short training courses for research scholars. It offers state-of-the-art IT and library facilities to its students and research scholars. It is fully funded by the Government of West Bengal. IDSK has been recognized by the ICSSR under the category of "ICSSR Recognized Research Institutes".

The **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS)** is a German political foundation that is part of the democratic socialist movement. True to the legacy of its namesake Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), it stands in solidarity with the workers' and women's rights movements. the organization serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as research centre for social development. The RLS has close ties to the German party DIE LINKE. RLS provides political education and a centre for advanced social research in both Germany and throughout the world. RLS is one of six party-affiliated political foundations in Germany; it supports partners in over 80 countries striving for social justice, strengthening public participation, and social ecological development.



How do you learn history while keeping your eyes and ears open? What does it mean to be conscious of history? The series 'First History Lessons' was born from the search for answers to these questions. Each of the books is on a unique subject. The text is accompanied by pictures drawn by patachitra artists. The objective of this book is to explain, simply, various periods and various complex ideas in history. After reading these books, children will learn to ask questions—that is our hope.